

SOMETIMES YOU NEED A CHEERLEADER



When I think about how my job impacts my life, from simply keeping me busy to its most fulfilling moments, I realize how integral employment is to my wellness. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Association (SAMHSA) defines wellness by 8 dimensions: emotional, environmental, financial, intellectual, occupational, physical, social, and spiritual. I personally find it helpful to visualize this concept as a pie. Having meaningful employment clearly has a direct impact on the “financial” and “occupational” pieces of the pie, but it is important to consider how employment can indirectly impact the rest of the pie. Quality of life is not exclusively defined by how much money one has. Having safe and affordable housing, being able to nourish yourself, and even enjoy simple pleasures are better indicators of a high quality of life, and can be directly impacted by job status. Beyond that, engaging in work helps occupy time, strengthen sense of purpose, and expands our social networks.

I have personally struggled with my own wellness. I have endured both invisible and yet deeply exposing mental health struggles that I continue to work through. Education helped me feel purposeful and was instrumental in my recovery. After graduation I applied to work at Pathways Vermont and despite my social anxiety and depression, they took a chance on me and hired me as a paid admin intern. I shakily answered the phone and sorted the mail, and they kept the faith in me and held onto me in anticipation of creating a peer support program. I was making so much progress with mental health and wellness, but as life goes, about a year later I experienced a mental health crisis and ended up in the hospital. ***I am so grateful to this day that I was able to keep my job through months of recuperation. Re-entering employment was beyond helpful for having the rest of the pieces of my “pie” come***

together. This idea of working at a job, and in the process, recovering from mental health issues is something that I can genuinely stand by.

I know that meaningful employment contributes to my own wellness in a major way, but I also know that I am very lucky, and that many of us living with mental health challenges struggle with employment. ***In fact, mental health issues and psychiatric disabilities are the leading cause of disability in the United States;*** people who identify with these challenges have the lowest employment rate of any other group of disability (~20% versus 35%¹). And unfortunately, it's only getting worse; in 2012 the rate of employment among individuals with psychiatric disabilities dipped below 20%. At the same time, a striking amount of these individuals, up to 70%², have self-reported a desire to work. How is there such a discrepancy?

The good news? It doesn't have to be this way. Individual Placement and Support (IPS) is an evidence-based, supported employment practice that improves employment outcomes through strengths-based, customized support. This means that IPS can take many forms, it can range from connecting jobseekers to competitive employment to supporting them to maintain their employment by requesting accommodations and negotiating with employers. Studies have shown that IPS can increase rates of competitive employment among individuals with psychiatric disabilities by nearly 60%³.

For the past three years I have served as the Employment Specialist at Pathways Vermont's The Wellness Co-op. Over time, I have built upon and developed methods that combine IPS with the principles of peer support when supporting individuals with employment. Throughout this process, people work on developing important employment skills, maximizing all aspects of the job search and navigating barriers to maintaining employment. ***Over the past 3 years I have watched as the people I work with reclaim the passions and individual strengths that had been deeply buried by stigma, judgment and a general lack of support.*** Last year 32 individuals sought support with their employment goals. Of those 32, 21 found work. I believe that the key to success lies within each person. In the heart of my deepest struggles, having people who would talk with me and connect with me about things beyond my diagnosis was one of the most helpful things. Since this period, I have reclaimed confidence and self-esteem. Now, I feel relieved that I can share my experience, not to re-traumatize but to relate to others and model persistence, resilience, and strength. ***For that reason it is as much my goal to support each person I work with to tap into their internal sources of motivation and determination as it is to accomplish their employment goals.*** I sometimes view myself as someone's personal cheerleader, one who will continue to cheer someone on for as long as requested. Together, a customized, person-directed approach to employment can break down barriers and open doors to a multitude of possibilities.

This is the first of a multi-part series exploring Pathways Vermont's Supported Employment program. Are you struggling with your job search? Are you thinking about going back to work? Attend our Employment Seekers Support Groups to find support from fellow job seekers, connect with our employment specialists and learn about resources available in the community. ESSG takes place Wednesdays at 4 pm at the Fletcher Free Library and Fridays at 1 pm at The Wellness Co-op (279 North Winooski Ave).